

Martín Espada

Aubade With Concussion

Poverty is black ice.

Naomi Ayala

You leave me sleeping in the dark. You kiss me and I stir,
fingers in your hair, eyes open, unseeing. You leave me asleep
every morning, commuting to the school in the city at sunrise.

The landlord's driveway, a muddy creek, ices over hard after
the freezing rain clatters all night. Your feet fly up, your head
slamming the ground, an eclipse of the sun flooding your eyes.
You sleep under the car. No one knows how long you sleep.

You awake with a hundred ice picks stabbing your eardrums.
You awake, coat and hair soaked, and somehow drive to school.
You remember to turn left at the Smith & Wesson factory.
The other teachers lead you by the elbow to Mercy Hospital,
where you pause when the nurse asks your name, where you claim
your pain level is a four, and they slide you into the white coffin
of an MRI machine. You hold your breath. They film your brain.

Concussion: the word we use for the boxer plunging face-first
to the canvas after the uppercut blindsided him, not the teacher
commuting to school at sunrise in a Subaru Crosstrek. Yet, you would
drive, ears hammering as they hammer in the purgatory of the MRI.

A week before, Isabela came to you in the classroom and said:
Miss, I cannot sleep. Three days, I cannot sleep. Her boyfriend called
at 2 AM, and she did not pick up. At 3 AM, a single shot to the head
put him to sleep, and he will sleep forever, his body hidden beneath
a car in a parking lot on Maple Street, the cops, the television cameras,
the neighbors all gathering at the yellow-tape carnival of his corpse.

You said to Isabela: *Take this journal. Write it down. You don't have
to show me. You don't have to show anyone.* On the cover of the journal
you bought at the drugstore was the word: *Dream.* Isabela sat there
in your classroom, at your desk, pencil waving in furious circles.
By lunchtime, as her friends slapped each other, Isabela slept,
head on the desk, face pressed against the pages of the journal.

This is why I watch you sleep at 3 AM, when the sleeping pills fail
to quell the strike meeting in my brain. This is why I say to you,
when you kiss me in my sleep: *Don't go. Don't go. You have to go.*